

Lessons of the Austrian presidential election

Peter Schwarz
24 May 2016

The 72-year-old economics professor Alexander Van der Bellen won the Austrian presidential election with 50.3 percent of the vote. Norbert Hofer of the far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) received 49.7 percent.

Van der Bellen officially stood as an independent candidate, but is close to the Greens, which he led from 1997 to 2008. On Sunday evening, he was running behind Hofer, with just 48 percent of the vote. Only after the postal votes were counted did Van der Bellen move into the lead, winning the election with a minimal majority of 31,000 out of 4.4 million votes cast.

This was just enough to prevent an outcome in which, for the first time since 1945, an extreme right-wing politician has entered the highest office in a Western European state. Nevertheless, the Austrian election marks a turning point for Europe. Hofer's defeat will not halt the rightward turn in Austrian and European politics. On the contrary, the assumption of the presidency by Van der Bellen, behind whom large sections of the old political elite, sections of the urban upper middle class and almost all the pseudo-left organisations have assembled, intensifies the conditions that are providing an impetus to the far-right.

According to opinion polls, 80 percent of Austrians are dissatisfied with the government, the establishment parties and the country's political system. A section of them voted for Van der Bellen through gritted teeth in order to prevent the election of a right-winger. But large sections of the poorest and most oppressed sections of Austrian society voted for Hofer, who posed as an opponent of the old elites. As one political scientist put it, the angry voted for Hofer, the disappointed for Van der Bellen.

It is striking that the far-right candidate scored above average not only in backward, rural areas, but also in former strongholds of social democracy and among layers of the population with low education and low incomes. The reason for this lies in the role of the

Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), the trade unions and the pseudo-left organisations which move in their orbit.

The pseudo-left outfits have suppressed the class struggle for decades, while moving further to the right. They play a leading role in the attacks on jobs, social and democratic rights, in the witch-hunting of refugees, the stepping up of the powers of the state at home and of the military abroad. This enables far-right organisations like the FPÖ to channel the anger against the old elites in a reactionary direction, at least initially.

This is an international phenomenon, which is especially pronounced in Austria, where Social Democracy can look back at a long and influential history, which is only comparable to some of the Scandinavian countries and Germany.

The SPÖ is the country's oldest political party. Its roots go back well into the 19th century and are closely linked to those of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Like the SPD, the SPÖ betrayed its internationalist programme in 1914 and supported the First World War. After defeat in the war and the dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy, "Red Vienna" became the epitome of a social democratic city. For a time, one in five inhabitants of the Austrian capital was a card carrying member of the SPÖ, which implemented numerous reformist projects—from building housing, establishing education and health provisions, and organising mass leisure activities.

The "Austro-Marxism" of Otto Bauer, Max Adler and Rudolf Hilferding, embellished with Marxist phrases, defended bourgeois rule. "While Austro-Marxism exposed the bourgeoisie in speeches and articles," wrote Leon Trotsky in 1929, it prevented the workers from "rising up against their class enemies." Austro-Marxism proved powerless against the rise of fascism.

The economic recovery that began after the Second

World War gave Austrian social democracy another impetus. Between 1945 and 2000, with just four years of interruption, it participated in every federal government. From 1970 to 2000, and from 2007 until today, Austria's chancellor was a Social Democrat.

Its influence reached its zenith in the early 1970s, when Bruno Kreisky, Willy Brandt and Olof Palme headed the governments of Austria, Germany and Sweden, forming an international triumvirate, which extended the influence of social democracy internationally, notably in Spain and Portugal, where the fascist dictatorships collapsed.

While the Social Democratic reformist policies attracted many workers and youth, the real task of Kreisky, Brandt and Palme was in bringing under control the wave of protests, strikes, riots and national liberation struggles that had swept over large parts of Europe and the world between 1968 and 1975.

Since then, the Social Democracy has stood at the head of the attacks on the working class. Tony Blair's New Labour, Gerhard Schröder's Agenda 2010 and François Hollande's recent labour law have become the epitome of class war in the interests of the banks and corporations. In Austria, the SPÖ responded to the devastating defeat in the presidential election (its candidate was eliminated in the first round with just 11 percent) by appointing the railway manager Christian Kern, who has pledged to step up austerity, as the new chancellor.

As president, Van der Bellen will work closely with Kern. He would also do this with an FPÖ government, should the extreme right win the next general election.

The most urgent issue in Austria and throughout the world is to build a new party of the working class, in order to provide a progressive, internationalist and socialist perspective to mass anger and indignation with the established parties.



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